

5. Public views on offenders in Malawi

Key Findings

- Malawians are most likely to believe that crime is committed by people from their own areas of residence – 45.6% of respondents to the survey indicated this, and, to this one may add the 7.4% of respondents who believed that unemployed people were responsible for crime and the 14.3% of the respondents who believed that crime in their area was caused by youths or teenagers, as these respondents would be likely to interact with these groups of people in their areas.
- Poverty or the lack of means of survival was most commonly raised as the main motivating factor for crime, that is, poverty was cited by 44.1% of the respondents and unemployment, itself often closely related to poverty by 16.1% of the respondents.
- 24.6% of all those interviewed reported that they knew, personally, someone who actually makes a living out of crime.
- Views of the victims of crime on who they believe was responsible for crime in their areas generally substantiate the perceptions of the general public

Information on who are thought to commit crime is based on two sets of information. The first is perception-based, and is formulated by the opinions of the general public who may not have been victims of crimes. The second is more factual, and based on the direct knowledge of those perpetrating crimes.

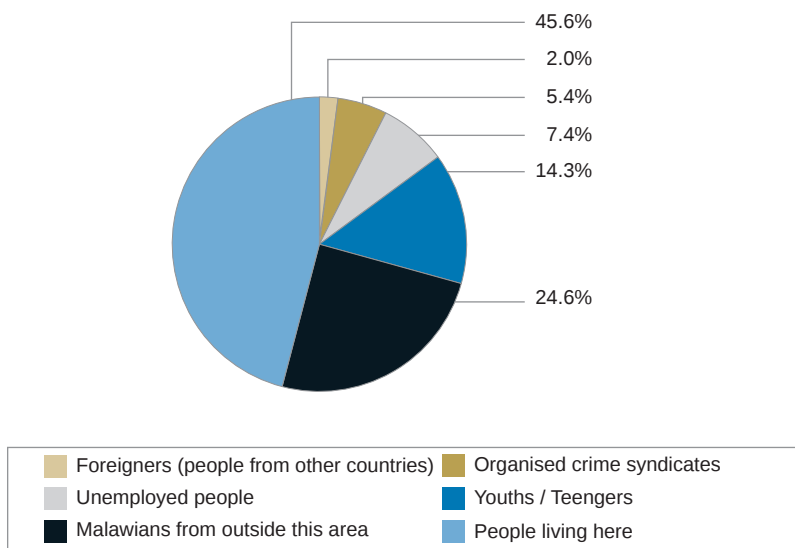
Respondents to the survey were asked their opinions on who they believed were responsible for crime in their area of residence, and why they believed these people had turned to crime.³⁵

35 The accuracy of this information is likely to vary; with those who come face to face with perpetrators during crimes such as assaults, robbery or sexual assault, having a more precise idea of who the offenders were, and those who have been victimised but did not actually see the criminals being more likely to base their opinions on who they think is responsible.

5.1 The views of the general public on who is responsible for crime

In many countries, the general public often believe that crime is committed by foreigners, people who have entered the country legally or illegally, and have turned to crime to supplement their income. This is not the case in Malawi. Indeed, Malawi does not seem to be affected by the xenophobia that often accompanies perceptions of who people believe are responsible for crime. Figure 26 below outlines who the respondents to the survey believed was responsible for crime in their areas.

Figure 26 Public views of offenders in Malawi (n=6,564)³⁶



Almost half of those interviewed (45.6%), believed that it was people from within their own areas that commit most of the crime, that is, they believed that people who live in the same general vicinity, or in the same community were responsible for crime in the area.

³⁶ Values of less than 1% have been excluded.

To this one may reasonably add the 7.4% of respondents who believed that unemployed people were responsible for crime and the 14.3% of the respondents who believed that crime in their area was caused by youths or teenagers, as these respondents would be likely to interact with these groups of people in their areas.

Importantly, residents of the urban areas were proportionately four times more likely to believe that unemployed people were responsible for crime, than respondents residing in the rural areas.

Just under a quarter of respondents (24.6%) believed that crime in their areas was caused by Malawians from outside of their areas.

Interestingly, given the prevalence of crop and stock theft, crimes of need, 5.4% of the respondents believed that crime in their areas was the result of organised crime syndicates.

Just 2% of the respondents believed that crime in their areas of residence was caused by foreigners.

5.2 The views of the general public on why people commit crime

Some of the categories of people the respondents believed were responsible for crime in their areas, suggest the reasons the respondents believed motivated people to commit crime.

For instance, when asked why they thought people committed crime, poverty or the lack of means of survival was cited by 44.1% of the respondents and unemployment, itself often closely related to poverty, by 16.1% of the respondents. This is reflective of the fairly common association of youth, unemployment and crime, a belief often associated with the assumption that unemployed youth turn to crime as a means of subsistence. This was supported by the 12.1% of the respondents who believed that people commit crime out of habit or custom.

However, criminal activity appears to be relatively open within communities, as 24.6% of all those interviewed reported that they knew, personally, someone who actually made a living out of crime. This may be

associated with crime being associated by so many as a means of survival or a way out of poverty.

Respondents in the South and Central Regions were statistically more likely to cite poverty and the lack of a means of survival as the main reason motivating crime than those in the Northern region. Respondents in the North were also the least likely to personally know someone who made their living from crime, a fact that in all likelihood stems from the lower levels of crime prevalent in that region.

5.3 The views of the victims of crime on who is responsible for crime

The views of the victims of crime on who they believe was responsible for crime in their areas generally substantiate the perceptions of the general public, who, as shown above, most commonly believed that crime was caused by people from within their areas and thus by people who would often be known to the victims, or to others in the community.

For instance, in the case of housebreaking, 24% of the victims of housebreaking indicated that they had recognised the offenders, 22.5% of the victims said that the offenders were known through general community knowledge, and 11.9% that others had witnessed the crime and recognised the offenders.

Figure 27 below indicates the number of victims (or in the case of murder, household respondents) who said they personally recognised the perpetrators.

Figure 27 Respondents who recognised the perpetrators

